

An Unwelcome Visitor

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Summary: On the night before his fourteenth birthday, Harry sends a letter to Sirius Black. It doesn't get there. Next day, he gets ... well, read the title.

1. The Missing Godfather

Author's Note: This story is set during the summer of the Quidditch World Cup. It was written before *Goblet of Fire* was published, and hence is not consistent with post-*Prisoner of Azkaban* continuity.

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><div class="center"> â€" chapter one â€"

THE MISSING GODFATHER

Although it was Harry Potter's fourteenth birthday, he didn't feel much like celebrating. This wasn't really the fault of his relatives the Dursleys. They were ignoring this birthday as completely as they'd done all the others since Harry started at Hogwarts, but he'd been expecting that, and at least this year they weren't forcing him to put up with any guests.

Nor had his friends from Hogwarts forgotten him. A flock of owls had been by earlier that night; the cards they'd brought -- from Ron, Hermione, Hagrid and Professor Lupin -- were lined up on his bedside table ... and Harry wished he could trade them all for a single scrap of parchment from his godfather, Sirius Black. Sirius had promised to write again soon in his last letter, delivered to the Hogwarts Express at the beginning of the summer, but over a month had gone by with no word from him.

At first, Harry hadn't been especially concerned. He knew that Sirius was on the run from the Ministry of Magic and might have difficulties using owl post. The Dursleys kept Harry almost completely out of

touch with the magical world over the summer, but as the Muggle government was in on the search too, Harry felt sure that any progress would be reported on the evening news. He'd been watching it of night all summer (to Uncle Vernon's great annoyance) and so far there had been no mention of Sirius Black.

As the days turned to weeks, however, Harry had grown more worried. It wasn't just the Ministry of Magic from which Sirius was in danger. To prove his innocence, Sirius had to find Peter Pettigrew, who would in turn be seeking out his master, Lord Voldemort. If Sirius had encountered Pettigrew or Voldemort and come off worse, Harry doubted that anyone involved would send a press release to the Daily Prophet.

Harry had resolved that if he didn't hear from Sirius before his birthday, he'd have to do something to find out why not. So when his birthday cards -- but still no message from his godfather -- had arrived, Harry sent a note back with Ron's tiny owl, asking Ron to see if his father had heard anything more about Sirius. Mr Weasley worked for the Ministry of Magic and would presumably know of any information being kept from the general public.

Harry then set his alarm clock so he could slip downstairs next morning and phone Hermione before the Dursleys woke up. Hermione didn't have an owl of her own, but she did have a subscription to the Daily Prophet, and, knowing her, read it front page to back every morning. Hermione was the cleverest witch Harry knew; if anything had been reported in the wizarding newspaper that might explain what was up with Sirius, she would have noticed and remembered it.

Nonetheless, Harry was hoping he wouldn't have to risk calling her at all. If the Dursleys caught him at it, they'd likely be angry enough to stop him visiting Ron for the Quidditch World Cup. Sirius might simply be having trouble finding an owl, or writing materials, and Harry had taken steps to solve that problem too. After scribbling 'Been worried, please write' near the top of a blank piece of parchment, he had wrapped it around a Muggle pen, bound the lot to Hedwig's leg and told her to go and find Sirius.

Now, Harry thought as he slumped back onto his pillow, he could do nothing more but wait ...

Harry was jerked awake by the sound of Hedwig's wrathful screech as she came swooping back through the open window. Bits of what looked like cobweb clung to her wings and body, and she was missing several tail feathers. The pen and parchment were still tied to one leg. The talons of the other were coated with blood.

Hedwig herself didn't appear to be injured. The wisps of greyish stuff stuck to her feathers dissolved the second Harry touched them. Once they were gone she soon calmed down; Harry, on the other hand, went from worried to panicked. Clearly something had gone very badly wrong for Sirius ... but what? At that moment Harry would have given anything to be able to talk to owls as well as snakes. As he couldn't, there was nothing else for it but to go and have a look himself.

He dressed quickly, stole down the stairs, picked the lock on the cupboard underneath, got his wand, broomstick and Invisibility Cloak

from his trunk and raced back up to his room. His intention was to send Hedwig to find Sirius again, this time following behind her. Hedwig, however, flatly refused to cooperate. She dug her claws stubbornly into the window-sill, and when Harry himself tried to go out the window, she flew up and dived at his face, driving him back into the room.

'Hedwig, let me out,' Harry whispered urgently. 'If Sirius is in trouble, I have to go and help him.'

Hedwig hooted sympathetically, hopped onto his shoulder and nibbled his ear, but still wouldn't let him near the window. Harry finally gave it up and went to sit dejectedly on the edge of the bed. Even if he did manage to get past Hedwig, he'd no real chance of finding Sirius without her. The more he thought about it, the less certain he was that he should try.

Hedwig wouldn't be acting this way without a good reason. If Sirius had got away from -- from whatever it was, he no longer needed Harry's help. If Harry went looking for Sirius, he might very well end up leading something back to him, or getting caught himself. It was also entirely possible that the creature that had attacked Hedwig had nothing to do with Sirius.

Harry lay down again and tried to get back to sleep, but other, less comforting thoughts kept intruding. If the thing Hedwig had encountered wasn't after Sirius, why hadn't the owls that brought his birthday cards been attacked too? And what sort of beast was it? The webs suggested some kind of spider, and Aragog and his relatives were definitely big enough to eat an owl. But surely their webs wouldn't simply vanish when touched? No ordinary spider Harry had ever squashed had had red blood, either.

Harry went over in his mind every terrifying monster he'd studied in Defence Against the Dark Arts, to no avail. More horrible than any of them was the possibility that Hedwig didn't want him going to help Sirius, because Sirius was already dead.

It was nearly morning before Harry at last fell asleep. He slept through the clock's alarm, only to be woken by Aunt Petunia's voice calling Dudley to lunch. Harry stumbled downstairs and choked down his food, neither speaking to nor being spoken to by the Dursleys. Once finished, he went straight up to his room. A little while later he heard Dudley and Uncle Vernon going out the front door and the sound of the car starting.

Harry spent the next hour stretched out on his bed, brooding pointlessly over the events of the previous night. If only he'd woken up in time to call Hermione ... surely she'd be able to figure out what was going on. It suddenly occurred to Harry that he had a perfect opportunity to call Hermione right now. Dudley and Uncle Vernon were gone, and as Aunt Petunia spent as much time spying on the neighbours as doing the washing-up, she'd probably still be at it.

Harry had just swung his legs off the bed when the doorbell sounded. He drew a sharp breath of frustration. There would be no chance of using the telephone until whoever it was had gone. After what had happened to Aunt Marge last summer, the Dursleys had become even stricter about keeping him away from visitors. He only hoped it

wasn't Aunt Petunia's friend Yvonne. Harry knew from bitter experience that the two of them could gossip for hours on end, and if he so much as showed his face downstairs with her in the house, he didn't even like to think about the row that would follow.

A great shriek of terror from Aunt Petunia brought Harry's gloomy reflections to a halt. 'Sirius!' he whispered joyfully, as he leapt off the bed and shot out of his room -- only to stop short in astonishment at the top of the stairs. It wasn't Sirius Black who stood looming on the threshold before the cowering Aunt Petunia. It was, rather, the last person Harry would have wanted or expected to have visit him for his birthday: Professor Severus Snape.

Aunt Petunia let out another ear-splitting screech, even longer and louder than the first. Snape stared at her, looking slightly taken aback. Whilst many students at Hogwarts lived in fear of his sharp tongue and foul temper, not even Neville Longbottom was reduced to hysterics by his mere presence. Moreover, Snape seemed to have made a deliberate attempt to appear inconspicuous by wearing Muggle clothes.

Unfortunately, the particular items of clothing he'd chosen (as the closest match for his usual black wizarding robes, Harry suspected) had exactly the opposite effect. With his greasy shoulder-length hair, sallow complexion and menacing demeanour, Snape would not have been a reassuring sight to Aunt Petunia under any circumstances. Dressed in black jeans, black Doc Martens and a black trench coat, he looked as though he'd been sent by a sinister terrorist organisation to kill James Bond.

As Aunt Petunia had no way of knowing who Snape was, Harry couldn't blame her for screaming. Snape wasn't so understanding. He surveyed Aunt Petunia with mounting irritation. As she drew breath to shriek yet again, he clicked his fingers and the sound of her voice cut off in mid-screech.

Aunt Petunia clutched at her throat. Snape took a step towards her. Aunt Petunia turned and ran, fast as her legs could carry her, up the stairs, past Harry and into her bedroom, still screaming silently. The door slammed and Harry heard what sounded like a large piece of furniture being shoved in front of it.

Harry turned back to Snape, who was gazing up at him with such an enraged expression that for an instant Harry seriously considered running into his own room and dragging something heavy in front of the door. But it would take more than a chest of drawers to keep Snape out, and if the Dursleys discovered who he was, they were certain to blame Harry for the whole situation. He had to get rid of Snape before Uncle Vernon got back.

Harry began walking slowly down the stairs. It would help if he had some idea why Snape was there. Harry hadn't got his Hogwarts letter yet; perhaps one of the school owls had been attacked too and Snape had come to investigate. If so, he'd obviously made up his mind that Harry was in some way responsible, and wasn't likely to be persuaded otherwise.

Harry reached the bottom of the stairs and started down the hall. Snape swept into the house. The front door slammed magically shut behind him, hard enough to rattle the windows. Before Harry could say

anything, Snape thrust a hand into his pocket and pulled out a piece of parchment.

'You've been writing to him, haven't you?' he snarled. 'You stupid boy, do you want to be murdered?'

Harry stared at the parchment, then at the half-healed scratches on Snape's hand.

'You've been taking his letters!' he yelled, torn between outrage and relief.

Harry snatched the piece of parchment away from Snape and skimmed his eyes over it.

Dear Harry ... hope this finds you well ... should have thrown the Ministry off the trail ... Buckbeak safely hidden ... will try to visit for your birthday ... let me know what plans you have ... Sirius

'He's coming to kill you, Potter, just as he killed your parents,' hissed Snape.

'He's not -- he didn't --' Harry shouted, so furious he could barely speak. 'D'you think I'm still Confused, after two months?'

Snape gave Harry a look of utter loathing. 'I think you're exactly like your father,' he said softly. 'Too arrogant to admit you were Confused ... too arrogant to admit you could be wrong. If he had listened to me, he'd still be alive today --'

'Told him not to trust Pettigrew, did you?' said Harry coldly. 'Does Dumbledore know you're here?'

The effect of this question on Snape was frightening. His sallow face went closer to white than Harry would have imagined possible, and the look in his eyes ... Harry backed away. He'd thought he'd seen Snape at his angriest last year in the hospital wing after Sirius escaped. Clearly, he had been mistaken ...

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2. A Case of Identity

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â€" CHAPTER TWO â€"

A Case of Identity

> From just outside the front door came the sound of tyres on gravel. For the first time in his life, Harry was glad to hear Uncle Vernon's car pulling into the drive. Before the engine even stopped, Dudley let himself in the house, calling out gloatingly, 'Harry, come and

see what Dad bought me!' <p>

When Dudley caught sight of Snape, his small, piggy eyes lit up.

'Dad!' he yelled. 'Harry's got his godfather in the hall!'

'He isn't --' Harry began.

'Look at the state of his hair,' Dudley interrupted, eyeing Snape insolently. 'It's nearly as bad as yours.'

'Nearly as bad?' said Harry, highly affronted. 'My hair may not lie flat, but at least I wash it!'

Snape glared from Harry to Dudley and then back again, as though trying to decide which of them to strangle first. Next second, Uncle Vernon came rushing in, his purple face even purpler than usual with rage.

'You! Get out of my house this instant!' he roared at Snape. Turning to Harry he bellowed, 'How dare you bring this man to our home! I warned you, boy ...'

'I didn't invite him here! And he's not --'

Before Harry could finish, he was shoved unceremoniously out of the way by Aunt Petunia, who'd apparently heard the car and come running back down the stairs. Her lips were moving at full speed, but no sound was coming out. She darted behind Uncle Vernon and gripped his shoulder. Next moment, Snape's Silencing Charm gave out from the strain.

'Vernon!' she shrieked. 'I opened the door ... and he ... and he ...'

Uncle Vernon didn't wait to hear what Snape had done. He let out a roar of fury, grabbed the collar of Snape's coat and drew back his fist. Snape's eyes flashed, and with a loud cracking noise Uncle Vernon was hurled several feet away from him, into the living room. Snape yanked out his wand and sent a beam of silver light to strike the photograph of the Dursleys in the centre of the mantelpiece.

The figures of the Dursleys in the picture began to glow. A strong wind sprang up, ruffling Harry's hair and Snape's trench coat. The real Dursleys -- who seemed to be getting smaller and smaller -- were blown off their feet and into the photo. Snape watched with an unpleasant smile as Uncle Vernon banged his fist against the glass and shouted -- noiselessly, as sound didn't appear to carry from inside the picture.

Harry started edging his way back towards the staircase. He had just set his foot on the bottom step when Snape's voice stopped him in his tracks.

'Where do you think you're going?'

'I'm going to my room,' said Harry. 'You wait for Sirius if you're so keen.'

'So you can come sneaking back under your Invisibility Cloak? I don't think so,' said Snape coldly, pointing his wand at Harry. 'You're staying right here.'

Harry glowered at him, then stuffed the letter from Sirius into his pocket and sat down at the foot of the stairs. In fact he still had his Cloak -- and more importantly, his wand -- with him from the night before. Luckily Snape didn't seem to have realised this, probably because Dudley's old clothes were so large on Harry that he could have practically kept a live Hippogriff in his pocket with no one the wiser.

Harry tried not to think about the trouble he'd be in if Sirius turned up and Harry violated the restrictions on underage wizardry to stop Snape recapturing him. Surely Sirius wasn't still planning to visit? He wasn't stupid, he must've figured out there was something dodgy going on when Harry didn't answer his letter.

Snape had taken up a position near the banister and was glaring at the front door, his eyes occasionally flicking back to check on Harry. Harry leant away from him and slowly eased his hand into his pocket. The minutes snailed by. Harry wondered how long Snape was planning to wait, and what he'd do when Sirius failed to appear. Snape seemed to have gone back to normal -- well, normal for Snape -- but Harry wouldn't soon forget the look on his face just before Dudley and Uncle Vernon had returned.

The doorbell rang. Harry's stomach contracted and he clutched his wand even more tightly. Snape muttered a word and the door flew open -- revealing the startled face of Dudley's friend Gordon.

Harry was a bit surprised to see him. Neither Gordon nor the rest of Dudley's gang had been around much since the summer Harry found out he was a wizard. Harry suspected Dudley had been warned by his parents to see that they all stayed as far away from Harry as possible.

'Get rid of him, Potter!' Snape hissed out of the corner of his mouth, keeping his eyes fixed on the door.

This Harry was only too happy to do. His chances of going to the Quidditch World Cup looked about zero right now, but that would be the least of his worries if Snape worked magic in front of Gordon and it got back to the Dursleys. If any stories of odd goings-on at number four made their way around the neighbourhood, Uncle Vernon wouldn't just lock Harry in his cupboard; he'd stuff him into his trunk as well.

'Gordon,' said Harry flatly. 'Dudley isn't in right now. Try coming back later.'

Gordon stared at Harry, open-mouthed. Then his eyes wandered over to Snape.

'Who's he?' Gordon asked.

'One of my teachers from school,' said Harry shortly.

'Why's he dressed like that?'

Harry was getting annoyed. 'Professor -- Professor Sharif was the top assassin in the Middle East, before he made too many enemies and had to flee to England. As there's not much work for hit men in this country, he took a job at St Brutus's Secure Centre. He hates teaching and he hates students, but if he killed any of the St Brutus boys, the school would lose their fees and he'd be sacked. Of course, you're still going to Smeltings, aren't you?'

Harry hadn't really expected Gordon to be frightened by this story. It appeared he'd vastly overestimated Gordon's intelligence, however. From the gormless expression on his face, Harry doubted Gordon had even understood it. Gordon gazed at Snape in befuddlement for a while longer, then turned back to Harry.

'I need to give this to Dudley,' he said, holding out a black canvas bag.

'Clear off!' said Harry irritably. 'I told you Dudley wasn't here.'

Gordon stood there, looking stupid. Snape stirred restlessly.

'Here, give it to me, I'll see he gets it,' said Harry, getting up and walking down the hall. When he got to the door, he reached out for the bag -- then ducked under Gordon's outstretched arm and went haring off down Privet Drive.

Several streets away from number four, Harry skidded to a halt. He leant against a low brick wall to catch his breath and reached into his pocket for the Invisibility Cloak. Before he could take it out, his arm was caught in a painfully tight grip. He gasped and whirled, to find Snape's face inches from his own. The two of them stood staring at one another, Snape evidently too furious to speak and Harry too surprised. How on earth had Snape managed to get there so quickly? Harry would've thought he'd more of a start on him than that. He hadn't even heard Snape running up ...

The silence was broken by a voice calling out sharply, 'What's going on here?'

Harry twisted his head to see a woman getting out of a police car and moving swiftly in their direction. As she approached, he recognised her as Police Constable Rose Pascoe. Three years ago, when Dudley had knocked down old Mrs Figg with his racing bike, Constable Pascoe had come round to number four to tell him she'd be keeping her eye on him. Harry had been locked in his cupboard for accidentally releasing a boa constrictor at the zoo, but even there he could hear quite clearly Uncle Vernon's angry shouting.

From then on, the very sight of Constable Pascoe driving by sent Uncle Vernon into a rage. For hours after, he'd mutter indignantly about malicious and unwarranted persecution of an innocent young boy, and throw out dark hints as to the sort of woman who'd join the police force in the first place.

Harry always found this extremely entertaining and normally would have been quite pleased to see her, but right now the last thing he wanted was Snape explaining himself to the Muggle police. As far as

Harry knew, the hotline the Ministry of Magic had set up for Muggles to report sightings of Sirius Black was still running. If Snape mentioned his name, it would almost certainly be used. Protecting Sirius from Snape would be difficult enough; Harry had no desire to take on the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol as well.

He tried desperately to think of something to tell Constable Pascoe, but came up blank. There was no explanation she was apt to believe for why one of his teachers would be chasing him down the street in the middle of the summer holidays, dressed like something out of a Mad Max film.

'You're young Harry Dursley, aren't you?' Constable Pascoe said, eyeing him with some concern.

'I -- yes -- _no!_ I --' Harry panted, out of breath from running, having not the faintest idea what to say and completely floored at being described as a Dursley. It was too bad Uncle Vernon wasn't around to hear, Harry thought wildly, he would've got done for assaulting a police officer for sure.

'And who might you be?' Constable Pascoe demanded of Snape, concern giving way to deep suspicion.

Snape let go of Harry's arm and reached into his coat for his wand. Her expression changed from suspicion to alarm -- she must have thought Snape had a gun. She flung herself on him, sending the pair of them tumbling over the garden wall.

Harry stepped up to the wall and looked down. Constable Pascoe, having landed more or less on top of Snape, was hanging grimly on to his arm, trying to get his wand away from him before he could take it out of his pocket. Harry didn't think Snape would be able to keep her off it for long; she was a sturdy young woman and Snape seemed half-stunned from his fall.

'No, wait, it's all right!' Harry cried. 'He -- he's my godfather, he's a professional magician, he was taking out a wand, not a gun!'

Constable Pascoe let go of Snape and stared up at Harry in amazement. Suddenly she and Harry shot straight up into the air like rockets, so quickly that by the time Harry realised what had happened, they'd already begun to drift slowly down. Looking groundwards, he saw Snape wrapped up like a mummy in a cocoon of bandages.

The flowering shrubs along the other side of the street shimmered and blurred, and a dozen green-robed witches and wizards came pouring out. One of them looked up and called out, 'All right there, Harry?'

It was Percy Weasley.

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> <p> Disclaimer: All characters and concepts from the Harry Potter series copyright J K Rowling.

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â€" CHAPTER THREE â€"

The Magical Law Enforcement Patrol

> Harry and Constable Pascoe landed with a slight bump. Percy was waiting for them alongside a slender witch with an enormous halo of frizzy black hair, who led the shocked and speechless Constable Pascoe away, murmuring soothingly, 'Special Air Servants ... new hostage rescue technique ... well done distracting him, we'll take it from here ...' <p>

Six of the witches and wizards had gathered by the wall to cover Snape with their wands. Two more witches -- one fantastically pretty and the other with a number of live bats clinging to her robes -- walked around muttering spells. A nervous, weedy-looking wizard was tending to several floating tea trays of whirring silver instruments. The apparent leader of the group, a wizard no taller than Harry and quite ordinary-looking apart from his height, kept a watchful eye on them all.

'What're you doing here, Percy?' said Harry. 'What's going on?'

'I'm here with the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol,' Percy said importantly, 'to apprehend Sirius Black.'

He gestured at the mummified Snape.

'Percy, that isn't Sirius Black,' Harry laughed. 'That's Professor Snape you've got wrapped up in there.'

Percy shook his head and looked at Harry sorrowfully.

'It's no good, Harry,' he said. 'We've been listening in the whole time. You told the Muggle policewoman he was your godfather; your cousin said so too.'

'I was trying to get rid of Constable Pascoe and Dudley made a mistake,' said Harry, exasperated. 'Take the bandages off his face, go on, you know what Snape looks like.'

'I know Sirius Black was one of the top Transfigurers Hogwarts ever turned out,' countered Percy. 'He could be looking like Neville Longbottom's grandmother by now if it suited him.'

The leader of the patrol came up to them. 'Macnair should be here any minute,' he said. 'Weasley, take Potter back to his house. He doesn't need to watch this.'

'You're going to execute him? Right here and now? Wait, you've got the wrong man!' Harry said urgently.

'Harry ...' said Percy. 'You can't still believe he's innocent. After the way he was threatening you? After the things he said about your father?'

'No, you've got the wrong wrong man! It's Professor Snape, I tell you!' The patrol leader turned to leave. Harry grabbed him by the back of his robes. 'You can't let Macnair kill him, not without checking him over!'

The patrol leader twisted around and gave Harry a long cold look.

'Better that than the Dementor's Kiss. Black's lucky we caught up to him in a Muggle neighbourhood.'

He suddenly seemed rather frightening for such a small and unprepossessing wizard, but Harry thought of Macnair about to arrive and forced himself to hold on.

'He's not Sirius Black, you've got to listen to me --'

Percy seized Harry by his wrists and pulled him off the small wizard, saying 'Leave him to me, sir, I'll talk some sense into him. Harry, listen to me,' Percy went on sternly. 'Sirius Black was the Dark Lord's spy. He betrayed your parents, murdered thirteen people and broke out of Azkaban to kill you. He was pretending to be innocent because he thought he could persuade you to join the Dark side. When he realised it wasn't working, he showed his true colours. It must be obvious --'

'SIRIUS WASN'T WORKING FOR VOLDEMORT, IT WAS PETTIGREW, I SAW HIM!' Harry shouted furiously. 'And it's not Sirius anyway, it's Snape ...' he trailed off. As soon as he'd yelled Voldemort's name, the entire Magical Law Enforcement Patrol had wheeled around to gape at him in absolute horror. Raising his voice to address his new audience, Harry said, 'How d'you think this will look in the Daily Prophet, with all the trouble you've had catching Sirius Black, if you end up executing the wrong person?'

'If it was Snape, who'd miss him?' muttered one of the patrol members, a tall, burly young wizard.

'I heard that, Mamble,' said a very cold voice off to Harry's side. Whilst the Hit Wizards had been distracted by Harry's shouting, Snape had somehow managed to get himself out of the bandages. 'No wonder the Ministry can't catch up to Black, if they're hiring idiots like you,' he sneered. 'I do hope they don't let you brew the tea, we lose quite enough Magical Law Enforcement officers in the line of duty as it is.'

Mamble's face went brick red. 'Professor Snape?' he said in a small voice. At that instant, he reminded Harry strongly of Neville Longbottom, in spite of looking nothing like him.

The patrol leader fired off a spell, which Snape blocked, but with some difficulty. He staggered back, his wand arm shaking.

'Don't be a bigger fool than you already have been, Ormesby,' Snape gasped. 'If I had been Sirius Black, you'd all be dead, thanks to Potter here.'

'Well, that's nice!' said Harry indignantly. 'Next time they want to cut off your head, I'll just let them get on with it, shall I?'

'Yes!' said Mamble, in a betrayed tone. He plainly felt that Harry had sadly failed to live up to his reputation as a vanquisher of evil wizards.

Before Snape could round on him, Ormesby called out, 'Krysia! Kuiama! Niall!' The two witches who'd been casting spells and the wizard with the tea trays hurried over. 'Check him out,' Ormesby ordered, keeping his wand pointed at Snape.

The three of them stepped over the wall. The witches waved their wands and the wizard consulted his instruments. Snape glared but didn't try to stop them.

Finally the bat-festooned witch shrugged and said, 'There's no disguise or concealment magic on him that we can detect, and he isn't Transfigured.'

Ormesby was not pleased. 'Even if you aren't Sirius Black, you've just seriously interfered with a major Magical Law Enforcement operation,' he told Snape. 'What are you doing here?'

'The same thing you are, trying to keep famous Harry Potter from getting himself killed,' snarled Snape. 'He invited Black here for his birthday! He's been writing letters to him all summer ...'

'Is this true?' Ormesby asked Harry.

'No ...' said Harry slowly. 'I didn't invite Sirius for my birthday, and I haven't been writing to him all summer.'

This was the truth, as far as it went. Harry had never got a chance to invite Sirius for his birthday, having sent him only the one brief note of the previous evening.

'You sent him an owl last night!' hissed Snape.

'How do you know who that letter was for?' Harry said coolly. 'You didn't manage to get it away from Hedwig, did you?'

Ormesby eyed Snape suspiciously. 'How would you know who the letter was for, if you didn't read it?'

Snape opened his mouth then closed it abruptly. 'Black's been writing to him,' he said to Ormesby. 'He's got the letter in his pocket.'

'Let's see it,' said Ormesby, holding out his hand to Harry.

With a feeling of dread, Harry took the letter from his pocket and gave it to Ormesby. Surely Sirius wouldn't have sent Harry anything the Ministry could use to track him?

Ormesby looked at one side of the parchment, then the other. 'This parchment is blank,' he said.

'Potter!' bellowed Snape.

'I didn't do it!' Harry protested, moving nervously closer to Percy,

now rather glad to be surrounded by Hit Wizards.

'He didn't do it,' confirmed the tea tray wizard. 'He hasn't worked any magic all day.'

'Was there a letter from Sirius Black on this parchment?' demanded Ormesby.

'I thought there was,' admitted Harry. 'Mind, he didn't give me much time to read it,' he added, shooting Snape a dirty look.

Now that Snape was no longer in any immediate danger of joining the Headless Hunt, Harry felt no particular need to defend him to the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol. The less certain they were of what Sirius had or hadn't written, the better for Sirius.

Ormesby was disgusted. 'If Sirius Black was ever here, he'll be long gone by now. Potter, go home. You,' he said to Snape, 'come with us. There'll be questions raised at the Ministry about your part in this.'

'And I'll be raising some questions at the Ministry myself, about the way this whole affair has been mishandled,' Snape replied venomously.

Harry didn't wait to be told to leave twice. Snape was looking daggers at him, and he didn't really want to be around when Macnair showed up to find that his quarry had eluded him yet again. Pausing only to say good-bye to Percy -- who looked highly put out at this latest turn of events -- Harry set off at a brisk pace towards Privet Drive, arriving shortly at number four.

The door of Uncle Vernon's car had been left open and a large box was sitting next to it. The box -- presumably what Dudley had wanted Harry to come and see -- turned out to be a large and expensive-looking stereo system. Harry scowled at it. Buying Dudley presents on his birthday was an all time low even for the Dursleys.

The Dursleys! Harry sprinted up to the house, flung open the front door and dashed into the living room. To his alarm, he could no longer see the Dursleys in the photo. The car was pressed up against the glass, with a crumpled bumper and a broken headlight -- fortunately there didn't seem to have been enough room in the picture for it to have built up much speed. Going in for a closer look, Harry noticed several of Uncle Vernon's drills strewn about the photographic lawn and, to his relief, tiny figures moving around in the windows of the photographic house.

As Harry wasn't allowed to work magic over the summer holidays, he couldn't have reversed the spell even had he known how. He'd have to go back and get one of the Hit Wizards to do it. Harry wasn't looking forward to letting the Dursleys out of the photo, but the longer they were left in there, the angrier they'd become. Perhaps the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol could explain what had happened, although Harry doubted the Dursleys would be in any mood to listen.

Harry heard the front door close. Stepping out into the hall, he observed with great displeasure that Gordon had returned.

'You again?' Harry said in annoyance. 'Dudley's still gone, he probably won't be back until late tonight. Try coming back tomorrow.'

Gordon began to laugh. Harry took a step towards the kitchen, ready to bolt should the need arise. Without Dudley to call him off, Gordon might well decide to take up Harry Hunting again. Perhaps Harry could come back with the Invisibility Cloak and convince him that the house was haunted...

'That was brilliant, Harry,' said Gordon, still laughing. 'But Mamble was right, you should have let them chop his head off.'

'Gordon?' said Harry, completely nonplussed.

'Happy birthday, Harry,' said Gordon. He took something small and silver-coloured from his pocket and tossed it to Harry. It was a Sickle-sized coin with an eye stamped on either side. Harry looked back up to see Sirius Black, standing inside a flickering, silvery, Gordon-shaped cloud.

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4. Questions and Answers

>

â€" CHAPTER FOUR â€"

Questions and Answers

> 'S-- Gordon!' said Harry in an urgent whisper. 'You've got to get out of here! The Magical Law Enforcement Patrol -- they were here, they might be listening, they -- they think Sirius Black is coming! You're a Muggle, you don't want to get in their way, they were angry enough at Snape!' <p>

Sirius looked amused. 'Yes, they are,' he said, gesturing towards the front door. 'Well, two of them at any rate. Second and third rose bush to the left. Don't worry, they won't see or hear anything to upset them.' He lifted the black canvas bag. 'Let's go to the kitchen, I've brought you a cake.'

*

'... but honestly, you should've seen Snape in his trench coat, he looked like a dangerous criminal. I reckon he's in serious trouble with the Ministry of Magic now,' Harry finished with deep satisfaction.

It was nearly eight o'clock. Sirius had departed not long after dinner, and Harry hadn't been sorry to watch him go. As pleased as he'd been to see his godfather again, he couldn't help but worry about the terrible risk Sirius was taking, visiting right under the

noses of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol.

Harry had decided to take advantage of his Dursley-free evening by calling Hermione and telling her the whole story, up to the point that he'd left the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol. He didn't think it wise to mention Sirius. The Hit Wizards were almost certainly still around, and whatever magic Sirius was using to keep them from overhearing had likely gone with him.

'I don't know ...' Hermione replied slowly. 'I mean, your aunt let Snape in, didn't she? He didn't break into the house. And when your uncle told him to leave, he didn't give him very much time before he tried to hit him. Of course Snape shouldn't have been using magic in front of Muggles except in an emergency ... but if Sirius Black was about to show up, it was an emergency, and the Ministry thought he was going to, so they can't very well say Snape shouldn't have.' Hermione paused, then said curiously, 'Why did they think Sirius was going to show up, if they didn't know about the letter?'

'I dunno ...' said Harry, 'but if the spell on the photo hasn't worn off by morning, I'm going to send an owl to Mr Weasley about the Dursleys. I'll ask him.'

In fact Sirius had assured Harry that the spell would not wear off on its own. Harry had wanted to leave the Dursleys trapped in the picture for the rest of the summer, but according to Sirius only the rooms whose outsides were visible actually existed inside the photo. This meant no kitchen and no food. Sirius hadn't been certain whether or not the Dursleys had electricity or running water. Harry rather hoped not, it would serve them right to spend a night without either.

'Maybe if you told the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol about Hedwig,' Hermione continued. 'Snape must've cast an Owl Net with your name and Sirius's woven into it. He has plenty of your old papers and I suppose some of Sirius's must still be lying about Hogwarts. But then they'd know you were sending that letter to him ...'

'An Owl Net?' said Harry.

'Yes, they're illegal, without special permission from the Ministry of Magic. Illegal and dangerous -- broomsticks can get tangled in them, people have fallen and been killed. It's a good thing Hedwig wouldn't let you go flying off to find Sirius.'

'If Snape hurts Hedwig, I'll chop off his head!' said Harry furiously. 'Is it going to be safe to let her out at night? What if he puts another one of those things up?'

'I've never heard of an owl being killed by an Owl Net -- only witches and wizards, and even that's quite unusual,' said Hermione. 'Normally a person on a broomstick would just tear right through, but if they get knocked off, the Owl Net isn't strong enough to hold them up. In any case, Hedwig wouldn't get caught unless she was carrying a message from you to Sirius.'

Harry was not reassured. 'Maybe I should leave her with the Weasleys this year. I mean, Snape tried to kill Neville's toad for no reason, and he hates me more than ever, especially after this, and Hedwig clawed his hand, and -- and I think he might be going mad.'

'Dumbledore didn't think he was,' Hermione said sceptically.

'Not because of last year! When Snape was here today -- it was weird, all I did was ask if Dumbledore knew where he was, and I've never seen him that angry, never. If Uncle Vernon and Dudley hadn't got back just then, I don't know what he'd've done to me. And then he acted as though nothing had happened. Why would a simple question set him off that way?'

'He'd probably realised that during the summer he couldn't take a hundred points off Gryffindor or give you two months detention for answering back,' said Hermione dismissively. 'He only seemed scarier than usual because he was, you know, in the Muggle world, in your actual house. I'll read up on some owl protection charms ... or maybe Hagrid can keep Hedwig at his hut ...'

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Next morning, after breakfast, Harry sent Hedwig out with a note for Mr Weasley. A couple of hours later, a green Ministry car pulled into the drive. Out stepped Mr Weasley and, to Harry's surprise, Ron. When Harry opened the front door, Ron waved and called out, 'Pack your things, Harry, you're coming with us!'

'What, now?' said Harry. 'But it's a week early. And the Dursleys aren't likely to let me go at all, after what happened yesterday.'

'I'll -- er -- talk to them, Harry,' said Mr Weasley. 'Let's get your trunk out to the car and then we'll see about that photo.'

Even though most of Harry's school things were still packed from last year, it was over an hour before his trunk was stowed in the boot of the car. Mr Weasley had dozens of questions about every Muggle-made object in the house, starting with Dudley's stereo system, which was sitting just inside the front door. Harry would as soon have left it outside to be rained on or stolen, but after Sirius arrived Harry had been afraid the neighbours might notice and investigate. He'd had to be very careful not to stare too obviously at the silvery outlines of the wizards in the rose bushes whilst dragging the box into the house.

When Harry and the Weasleys finally made it to the living room, the Dursleys were still inside the photographic house.

'I can't reverse the spell with them in the house -- they'd be smashed against the walls,' Mr Weasley said.

He tapped on the glass with his finger.

'I don't think sound carries through the glass,' Harry told him. 'Uncle Vernon was banging on it and yelling yesterday -- I mean, I could see him banging and yelling, but he wasn't making any noise.'

Harry thought for a bit, then found a piece of paper and wrote -- '_Mr Weasley's here, come outside and he'll get you out'_. As Harry was propping his note up in front of the photo, Mr Weasley pointed at

the drills in the photographic front garden.

'Harry, what are those things?'

'They're called drills, Uncle Vernon sells them. Here, I'll show you how they work.'

Harry fetched the latest Grunnings model from Uncle Vernon's bedroom and explained its operation to Mr Weasley. That done, he didn't particularly want to be in the house when the Dursleys got out of the photo.

'Let's go outside, Ron,' Harry said.

They left Mr Weasley happily drilling holes in the Dursleys' living room wall.

'Be careful when you do let them out -- Uncle Vernon tried to punch Professor Snape,' Harry called back to him.

Mr Weasley gave Harry an absent-minded wave. He had left off drilling the wall and was eyeing the sofa and coffee table speculatively.

'Your Dad's quite sure the Dursleys will let me visit you?' Harry asked Ron, once they were out in the front garden. 'They said if they had any trouble out of me they wouldn't, and trouble doesn't come much worse than Snape on your doorstep.'

'Dad's got his orders directly from the Minister for Magic,' Ron replied, sitting on the wall near the parked car. 'You're to stay at our house, whether your relatives want you to or not. Fudge was quite upset -- Snape turning up here like that, and you still thinking Sirius was innocent. Dad's been assigned to look after you for the rest of the summer, and --'

'Why were the Hit Wizards here yesterday?' Harry interrupted. 'They didn't seem to know Sirius had written me until Snape told them.'

'It was all Percy's fault!' said Ron indignantly. 'He saw the note you sent me, about how you were expecting to hear from Sirius before your birthday. I tried to tell him Sirius was innocent, but that only made it worse. He went and told the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol!' Ron sat fuming at his brother's intransigence for a moment, then continued more calmly, 'As they weren't really convinced at first, they just sent one wizard to keep a lookout. Snape walked right past him, he thought Snape was a Muggle --'

Harry grinned, remembering what Snape had been wearing. 'This lookout -- he was from an old wizarding family like your one, wasn't he?'

'Er, yes, how did you know?' said Ron, somewhat puzzled. 'Anyway, he was taken completely by surprise when your aunt started screaming -- didn't dare take on Sirius Black by himself and it took time for the rest of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol to get here. By then Snape was holding you at wandpoint, only they thought he was Sirius --'

'What happened to Snape, anyway?' said Harry.

'Nothing!' said Ron in great disgust. 'There wasn't much to charge him with and the Ministry was afraid of what he could tell the Daily Prophet_. It was all very embarrassing for the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol, you know ... not only mistaking Snape for Sirius Black and nearly killing him, but the way he got past their surveillance and out of the Binding Spell they'd put on him. Fudge thought Snape was mad -- wanted to have him committed to St Mungo's for observation, but Dumbledore talked him out of it.'

'Hang on -- Dumbledore talked him out of it?' said Harry, surprised.

'Yeah ... he said he knew for a fact that Snape was perfectly sane and it would make the Ministry look even worse when St Mungo's confirmed it,' said Ron.

'It's just that Snape acted really weird when I asked him if Dumbledore knew he was here. I thought maybe Dumbledore had sacked him, or would do when he found out. Wasn't Dumbledore angry?'

'It didn't sound like he was,' said Ron. 'Of course, I wasn't there -- I heard this from Percy. He was furious with both of them: Snape for trying to catch Black himself instead of notifying the Ministry and Dumbledore for not taking the whole thing seriously enough. First time I've heard him criticise a Hogwarts teacher ...' Ron gave Harry a sideways look. 'He wasn't too happy with you either ... Did you really grab Ormesby's robes? You're lucky to still have your hands! He was thrown out of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol for brutality, you know, about a year after You-Know-Who disappeared.'

'What, Ormesby?' said Harry in disbelief.

'He was,' Ron said. 'It's only with the Sirius Black crisis dragging on so long that he managed to get himself reinstated. I'm surprised he didn't curse Snape on the spot instead of waiting for Macnair -- must've been on his best behaviour ...'

'I think he may have tried to, but Snape blocked it,' said Harry uneasily. He was thinking of the way Ormesby had looked at him when he'd grabbed him by the robes. Ron's story didn't seem quite so preposterous anymore.

'Why'd you have to tell them who Snape really was?' said Ron. 'We could've been rid of him at last! Mind, it would've looked really bad for old Ormesby, executing the wrong person his first week back on the job. He took Snape's side at the Ministry -- said Snape had done the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol a favour, showing them how unprepared they were to deal with the real Sirius Black. If they couldn't keep a Potions master and a neurotic fourteen-year-old in hand ...'

Ron sniggered. Seeing the offended look on Harry's face, he held up his hands placatingly.

'Sorry, that's what Ormesby said. He was really angry about the way the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol acted when you mentioned You-Know-Who. Course, it was partly as they were afraid he might

actually be hanging around. They thought when Snape was talking about Sirius, it was Sirius talking about You-Know-Who. Ormesby's started making all Hit Wizards say the name, two of them have resigned over it already --'

A tremendous bellow of rage echoed from the house. Seconds later, Mr Weasley came hurrying out the front door.

'Come along, boys, it's time for us to leave,' he told them, looking slightly flustered. As they were getting into the car, he gave Harry an embarrassed look and said, 'I, er, would have repaired the living room, if your uncle had given me the chance.'

â€" THE END â€"

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> <p> Related Stories:

Under the Rose Bush - Snape discovers a means of paying Harry back for the distressing events of this story.

The Serpent - Find out how far Snape is willing to go to take his horrible revenge on Harry.

The Butterflies - Ormesby turns up again, and this time he's after Professor Lupin.

The Serpent of Lord Voldemort - Explains part of the reason why Snape was so angry with Harry (the 'If he had listened to me, he'd still be alive today --' part. 'Does Dumbledore know you're here?' is still a few stories away.)

Thank you to all the people who've reviewed my stories.

* * *

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file.